

15th Storyworth: What Was Your First Boss Like?

As noted earlier, I view my career in specific sub-sets, starting from my pre-professional, then as an employee, and finally as an Independent Consultant (IC). Each has a memorable “boss” worthy of note, so that is how I intend to respond to this Storyworth prompt, even if each is not strictly my “first” in all cases.

Before I worked as an employee for anyone while I was in my schooling prior to my Master’s Degree, I worked selling magazines, candy and the like door to door. I am sure much of my success was due to genetic traits inherited from both my parents, but especially my Dad. I do not consider it the slightest bit ironic, nor even erotic, to suggest he could “charm the pants off customers”. I find it very difficult to believe he didn’t actually do so, as I am sure he had far more than his share of opportunities. But this is supposed to be about me rather than him, and I NEVER made ANY efforts in that direction until I was long out of my relationship with Lynne, in case anyone should try to suggest otherwise. With most of my selling being on behalf of school activities and Boy Scouts, I presume also that most neighbors were relative pushovers for a smiling kid with a gift of gab, perhaps not least because it was at least earned rather than demanded funds like taxes and the like.

I don’t really recall much about any of the leadership of those organizations, however, so the “first Boss” I’ll write about was the man who owned the RV store where I’d worked AFTER I had worked in a library job at Vassar, also obtained for me by my Mom, a man named Hal. As usual, it was during a vacation period from school, and I typically worked during the summer break and the Xmas Holiday break. Oddly, the Vassar job gave me some experience I would put to good use when I worked for Gaylord Bros, a library supply house, as my LAST pre-IC role. And while the job was memorable, my boss at Gaylord fell short of that description.

No doubt my favorite boss from my pre-professional roles was Hal, who I worked for only between my sophomore and junior years at Clarkson. In addition to being laid back, he was far from a micro-manager, a trait sadly lacking in far too few of the people for whom I have had roles to play. I learned from him to try to bring him solutions, rather than just problems, even as I also understood his need to be aware if ANYTHING was a hand grenade waiting in his drawers. But that trait will prove a common theme in the people I most enjoyed working for and with throughout my career.

One memorable episode with Hal was the time he held a pool party for the staff at his home. He had steaks and lobster, neither of which had been on MY plate previously. I had just met Lynne, and she agreed to join me as my guest, wearing the same white velvet bikini she had made which first attracted me to her, when she “errantly” dropped the bottoms on the beach while toweling off. How to make friends and influence people ;-). Which I suspect she did at Hal’s as well (the influencing, not dropping trou ;-). because he seemed thoroughly non-plussed when she ate two whole lobsters, for which I was mortified. I think instead he saw her as eye candy worthy of the cost, as she certainly knew how to impress on a diving board ;-). Some lifeguard ;-).

My most memorable Boss as an employee was actually my first when I turned professional and went to Fafnir Bearing out of Clarkson in ’73. Sadly, I don’t recall his name (what, after almost 50 years? ;-). but I remember well what I learned from him. He was in charge of the grind and hone functions of the Manufacturing Engineers at corporate in New Britain, CT, where I was hired from school to runoff and install new machinery at multiple plants. So I learned the value of statistical and trend analysis in predicting machine reliability, then the very hands-on of training floor personnel in the operation and maintenance of the equipment, which I put to good use in subsequent floor work across my career.

I cannot honestly say why I had been selected – I thought it was because of my previous machine experience at the time, but was later far from sure. Not a negative, but I was surely wet behind the ears still, and he took me under his wing enough to smooth the rough edges. Unfortunately, when the business turned down as they inevitably do, he was unable to keep me either, which also taught me a lot, and led to my working for two bosses at Rollway Bearing worthy of note. The first was hired soon after me, so I really had no right to expect otherwise. But Surrendra Jain was a Sikh who practiced his faith. I never felt threatened by him, and was given as much rope as I wanted, along with guidance. When he left I thought I might be granted the Manufacturing Engineering Manager role, but the next paragraph will explain why that never happened.

I had been working at Rollway for a company with a lot of large machinery from WWII which had manual controls, a huge labor cost. And I had a solid capability to make control systems which could make those machines perform like state of the art for pennies on the dollar. So when Ken Lehr replaced Surrendra, I was sad, and started looking. I found a job with the Nestle plant in Fulton, a lateral move but with greater future potential I figured. Little was I to know they would close the plant only a few years hence, but at the time I had turned in my resignation, to be effective in two weeks. That night I got a call at home asking if I could meet Ken at the Holiday Inn at the end of John Glenn Blvd near Baldwinsville the next morning.

It snowed a fresh foot of snow overnight, but I dutifully trudged to the promised meeting, as did he from his home in Skaneateles, no small feat. There he told me that he and the VP would not accept my resignation. They needed my skills. And when I acknowledged I would be a whore no matter what I did, I traded their paying entirely for my MBA for my promise of two more years, as long as they included a REAL subordinate for me. I wanted personnel skills, to which they agreed. Sadly, they never ceased to need my technical talents more than my managerial ones, but I had aspirational needs, too. So we parted in 1979 on good terms, when I went to Shader Roller in Ogdensburg with my MBA to become the Engineering Manager there.

Each of my many bosses could be worthy of note, as I learned from each one something valuable to take to my next job. But the hands-down best boss EVER was Dick Coffin at GE. He hired me in 1991 because he needed a warm body who could speak the C lingo with his IBM vendor when his prior IC Project Manager left for greener pastures with NYS. They had burned through ¼ of the budget when I was hired, and when I read the contract I realized IBM actually had no deliverables – once they burned the bucks they could simply leave. So I offered to renegotiate the job with them, forcing their “handshake” protocol between the 13 warehouse sites and the GE COBOL MRP systems, for the first application of barcoding and RFID in GE Power. In return, I would build the 13 unique user interfaces, so they could work more like they previously did, even while giving the databases commonality across GE, and get fixed deliverables. When I approached Dick about halfway through that new plan to try to do SOMETHING about the fact I’d had to accept 80% of my usual rate when I’d accepted the role because his budget was set, he had Chris Trow call to offer me a job for exactly that 20% shortfall, with my ONLY responsibility being to share a beer with him, so he could bill HIS project for my cost. Dick says “sit” I don’t EVER look for a chair since then.

And when I’d finished the Duracell role and was trying to get back into GE, Dick had become the Global Sourcing Quality Engineer head and hired me to approve electrical grid equipment and vendors worldwide on GE’s dime, the best gig I ever saw. If not for the collapse of ENRON in 2002, which was 40% of GE Power business, I might be doing that still. And I recall one episode when I called together their entire Engineering Department to convince them to replace their sole-source GE shell batteries for their Uninterruptable Power Supply for their lubricating pumps, etc. with a DIN standard so they could stop the losses from liquidated damages, by writing the philosophy of Mick Jagger on the whiteboard; “You can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you might find, you get what you NEED”. That was Dick, my best Boss EVER ;-)

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